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Our University: Faiths on Campus

Holiday challenges and faith consternation on university campuses are real and never ending. These challenges and the discourse promoted by them should always be vibrant and alive.

Democracy is itself, a religious faith. For some it comes close to being the only formal religion they have. E.B. White

Intellectual, moral, ethical, and faith perspectives are the grist of university life. The interaction of beliefs and views transform people and provide opportunity. The result of such milling dramatically trumpets the value of an individual student and the greater work of the university in service to society by creating opportunity for free thought to flourish in a democracy.

In order for a university to thrive, beliefs and contributions of many members must be valued. Although each may hold different world views, different ethical and moral systems, and different faith perspectives, we are welded together in the common purpose of helping students achieve knowledge, wisdom, and dignity.

Christmas chimes ringing out traditional Christian carols at Southern Illinois University Carbondale recently highlighted the confounding difficulties of serving all while best serving our mission and ourselves.

Universities represent varied people groups, but are most powerful when different views are blended into a community in a way that highlights distinctiveness and simultaneously creates a confederacy. Great universities prize freedom of thought - and its expression - as the coalescence of multiple views into something called a community creating membership and satisfaction for belonging to something larger than self.

Look at a few seasonal celebrations that evidence belonging.

Kwanzaa, December 26 through January, is a secular holiday created by Black Studies professor Dr. Maulana Karenga in 1966, to reaffirm African values. Kwanzaa serves as a communal celebration among African peoples in the diaspora. It reflects seven principles: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith.

Hanukah, the Festival of Lights, is celebrated for eight days beginning this year on December 1. Instituted by Judas Maccabaeus in 165 B.C., Hanukah celebrates the purification of the Temple of Jerusalem, which had been desecrated three years earlier by Antiochus who set up a pagan altar, sacrificed pigs to Zeus, and banned circumcision.

The celebration of Ramadan concluded earlier in the fall. It is a month-long fast that all Muslims must keep during the daylight hours commemorating the first revelation of the Qur'an. Eid al-Fitr is observed on the last day of Ramadan and commemorates the breaking of the fast, September 10, 2010, this year.

For our Japanese brethren, the emperor's birthday is memorialized on December 23, the birthday of Emperor Akihito.

The Chinese New Year, February 2, 2011, the year of the Hare, is the most important celebration in the Chinese calendar. Chinese months are reckoned by the lunar calendar, with each month beginning on the darkest day. New Year festivities traditionally start on the first day of the month and continue until the fifteenth, when the moon is brightest.

Some celebrate nothing other than having a few days off to rest and relax, frequently eating too much and spending more money than intended, evidently to give the appearance of celebrating something.

In my house, we celebrate Christmas on December 25. The most widely celebrated holiday of the Christian year, Christmas is observed as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ, my savior and the virgin born Son of God, or God made man. Christmas customs are centuries old. Comparatively recent is the Christmas tree, first appearing in Germany in the 17th century. Colonial Manhattan Islanders, today known as New Yorkers, introduced the name Santa Claus, a corruption of the Dutch name St. Nicholas, who lived in fourth-century Asia Minor.

How a university should recognize any of those days is a complex question, and fraught with difficulty; but to act as if they do not exist is to deny history and to deny our students the opportunity to find common ground without sacrificing the personal beliefs they hold dear.

Have a great holiday season, or as we say in my house,

Merry Christmas.